



Hard Choices

Ezra 9:5 – 10:17

Last week we left Ezra with a big problem on his hands. After all the excitement of arriving in Jerusalem he finds that he has a major headache – many people including the leaders had married gentile wives. It was blatantly against the Law of Moses, which he was tasked with re-establishing in Judah. We saw how he was devastated by what he had discovered. How can you uphold important moral principles when not even your leaders can? Ezra also saw the implications for the people – this was one of the very sins that had got the people in to exile in the first place and one of the sins they had been warned against committing again.

How does Ezra respond? He mourns publicly for their sin, even though he hasn't committed it himself. That was one of the challenges of our message last week. How much do we mourn when we realise that we have sinned or others around us have? Or do we make our excuses, or make excuses for others? Ezra is soon surrounded by others coming to worship who share his sorrow.

Then he leads the people in a prayer of confession. There's some great examples here both for Christian leaders, and also for anyone leading intercession for others, and with others before God. It's also a good example of what happens when God's people come before Him.

It starts off with Ezra's confession in Ezra 9. What are the elements of Ezra's confession?

1. **Identification with the people.** Firstly Ezra, who had not even been part of this relaxed attitude to gentile marriages identifies with his people. He could have stood aloof but his desire was to lead them spiritually and he had to recognise that even though he wasn't part of the problem, God had called him to be part of the solution. It's one of the basic principles of leadership. I may not have been the cause of past problems, but God has called me to be part of the solution – that applies to leadership in all levels of the church. So on their behalf he tears his clothes, weeps, pulls out his hair and whatever. He feels the pain as much as them.

Actually the same principle applies to intercession. Intercessory prayer is a fundamental part of the life of the church. The key element of intercession is realising that God has called us to intercede for other parts of the body in the way that Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede for us. The Spirit intercedes for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. We identify with those hurting in the body – then we intercede. God wants us to understand the pain of those that we intercede for. Through it we understand His pain on their behalf and His pain on our behalf. Sometimes I've heard people mock other Christians who shout loudly or cry out to God on behalf of others. Surely He's not deaf they say? Of course He's not but healing comes in the body because other parts feel the pain and they pray – and often that prayer leads to action – as it did in this case – and God is honoured through it and God's people are blessed.

2. **Admission of the guilt.** Ezra and the people with him recognised that something had gone wrong. *"O God, I am too ashamed to raise my head in your presence. Our sins pile up, high above our heads; they reach as high as the heavens. 7 From the days of our ancestors until now, we, your people, have sinned greatly. Because of our sins we, our kings, and our priests have fallen into the hands of foreign kings, and we have been slaughtered, robbed, and carried away as prisoners. We have been totally disgraced, as we still are today. The people had sinned.* They were guilty and they had no excuse before God because they had plenty of previous history on this matter. Their forefathers had been punished and exiled because of their sins and they were starting to repeat the exercise. They did the same thing again and again. Confession is an important part of our life as God's people. When we know we have

done wrong, we just need to admit our sin and recognise our guilt before God. Particularly that we do the same thing again and again and there's no excuse. Notice that much later in the prayer he specifically refers to the sin on this occasion; the intermarrying. Confession isn't a general thing, it's specific. It's not just coming before Him to say that we've sinned, but how we've sinned. As we shall see in a moment, confession always takes us forward into repentance.

3. **Recognising God's grace** After the admission of God though comes the recognition of God's grace. *8 Now for a short time, O Lord our God, you have been gracious to us and have let some of us escape from slavery and live in safety in this holy place. You have freed us from slavery and given us new life. 9 We were slaves, but you did not leave us in slavery. You made the emperors of Persia favour us and permit us to go on living and to rebuild your Temple, which was in ruins, and to find safety here in Judah and Jerusalem.* God had given them a second chance despite their failure. Ezra recognised that they deserved nothing but God had been gracious to them. The amazing thing about confession before God is that we don't just recognise that we have failed before a holy God, but there is a realisation that God is a gracious God and in His love He still desires us if we will turn to Him in penitence.
4. **Recognising the need to change** *13 Even after everything that has happened to us in punishment for our sins and wrongs, we know that you, our God, have punished us less than we deserve and have allowed us to survive. 14 Then how can we ignore your commandments again and intermarry with these wicked people? If we do, you will be so angry that you will destroy us completely and let no one survive.* At the end of this confession comes the need to repent. Confessing sin before God isn't just about penitence, being sorry, but about repentance – changing direction. Ezra admits that the consequence of letting intermarrying continue was their destruction. They had been given a chance to return to Jerusalem – they should not blow it all now.

A true prayer of confession always ends up with genuine repentance – a genuine desire to change. How many times have we realised we sin and either not done anything about it, or have started to change but never went the distance and are back to doing the same thing again? You know the answer to that – many times. We need to understand the enormity of sin before God, and realise also the enormity of His grace, that through His Son, He has given us that way of forgiveness and blessed us so much and plans to do so even more. How can we take sin lightly again?

But how was repentance going to work out in this case as Ezra completed his prayer? In verse 2 of chapter 10 as the people Ezra is leading are also sharing his sorrow for the sin. The God speaks. Always listen for the voice of God. If you pray, expect God to respond. Prayer isn't just about asking for things, it's listening to what God is saying. In this case it comes through this man Shecaniah. Who? We don't know anything about him other than he was there. He's identified as the son of Jehiel, of the clan of Elam. We are not told the message was prophetic by Ezra clearly takes it that way. It's a tough message.

"We have broken faith with God by marrying foreign women, but even so there is still hope for Israel. 3 Now we must make a solemn promise to our God that we will send these women and their children away. We will do what you and the others who honour God's commands advise us to do. We will do what God's Law demands. 4 It is your responsibility to act. We are behind you, so go ahead and get it done."

Always listen for the voice of God when we pray. He can use anyone to speak His word. But Ezra recognises these words as of God. But the medicine is very drastic. We just read it. The only way was to send the wives and the children home. I'm not sure this specifically means divorce them, but it seems like it. They weren't supposed to have married them in the first place, and for the sake of God's people they were being asked to literally put them away.

To our modern society this seems an awful thing to do. Even in the Christian faith, divorce of partners because they are unbelievers has never been regarded as necessary or desirable:

1 Cor 7:12 To the others I say (I, myself, not the Lord): if a Christian man has a wife who is an unbeliever and she agrees to go on living with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a Christian woman is married to a man who is an unbeliever and he agrees to go on living with her, she must not divorce him.

Interestingly, those words were very much Paul's personal position which related to people who were married to unbelievers. I don't have time to follow that one up tonight. But what Paul is underlining that being married to an unbelieving spouse is less than ideal but these people have committed themselves to one another and there is a need to honour that.

What this does show is that God intends us to deal with sin in our lives and sometimes the consequences are difficult but we need to take the hard decision to do it or we should not expect or get the blessing of God. This one is a live one in many church situations. When I was in London many in our church became Christians. Many of them had been in long term cohabiting arrangements and some had families as is the custom these days. It would not be long before these people realised that they were in a relationship that was not of God, as a marital situation is God's will for men and women. What did they do?

The only sure thing was that they couldn't leave things as they were. But what did they do? Did they marry their partner, or did they terminate their relationship? Whatever the answer, the solution was painful. Those who were not married and living together usually split. Where those who had children, the Christian partner usually asked their unbelieving partner to marry them; and if they didn't – the relationship ended. There were some hard decisions made and lots of tears. Virtually all of those who took hard decisions have seen the blessings of God in their lives.

Following a holy path that honours God is not an easy path. It faces us sometimes with hard moral dilemmas. We have to make decisions that affect our lives and often the lives of others around us. This kind of situation isn't the only kind of moral dilemma we might face. We know from Just 10 that when we see what sin means, we can find ourselves in difficult moral situations where taking a stand is a hard road to follow, be that in our families, friendships, marriages, work or even in the church.

We read the rest of the story. You would have thought that in this huge gathering that there would have been lots of objections to what was on the face of it a very draconian measure. But only three people are recorded as objecting. The rest went through what must have seemed a heartbreaking process. They understood the implications of what it meant in the long term for the whole of society to honour God

The list at the end of chapter 10 seems enormous. Actually it isn't. By my calculations there seem to have been about 100,000 Jews back in Judah by that point, maybe more. The list is only a small fraction of a people that by and large had kept separated from the gentile nations. The problem was that it included leaders and the rest of the population had not complained about it so they were complicit by their inaction. It was only when Ezra arrived that it became an issue.

So was Ezra using a sledgehammer to crack a nut? The principle here is one of leaven. It only takes a little leaven to make bread rise. We've all learned the pictures through Sunday School. A blot a blot however large it is. A beetroot stain will ruin a white shirt however large it is. However small our sins are, they are large enough to destroy our relationship with a holy Father God. Ezra knew this. We should understand it too.

I have told this story several times before. It comes from an African Bishop. The story is told of a water pipe that supplied a village. It was like an aqueduct – a thick pipe that carried water from a spring to the village. Unfortunately the pipe had a chunk knocked out of it which no-one could be bothered to fix. A frog, looking for water jumped in and got carried in the flow to a point where the pipe narrowed and he got stuck. The water flow in the pipe slowed as the water backed up behind the dead frog.

This meant that other frogs got in and swam along with the now much slower flow until they got stuck to and the water flow to the village stopped. It was a big job. The villagers had no idea where the pipe was blocked and had to dig up the pipe in a lot of places before they got rid of the dead frogs. The moral of the story is that if we do not deal with small sins, they become big problems because they open us up to make the same compromises in other areas of our lives. Dealing with the sin when it's small is much better than having to deal with the consequences when we have to make hard choices much further down the road.

That was Ezra's position as he dealt with the issue. What was the result of it? Ezra expected that the nation would see the blessings of God for the decision that it came to on marriage to Gentiles. It did – but actually in the short term they seem to have received a lot of grief from the surrounding peoples (Neh 1:3). The consequence came 17 years later in the form of Nehemiah and with it the city of Jerusalem came back to life, more families of former exiles arrived and the land achieved more autonomy from Persia.

One of the reasons I did the Just 10 series is that I believe that God wants us to understand what the nature of sin is through giving us His perfect standards. He wants us to understand just how much He detests sin, but also how much He loves us. He hasn't given us them to make us miserable, but to bring blessings. But to let the rivers of blessing flow God is calling us to make hard choices about our relationships, our words, our lifestyles, our habits, our thoughts, our Christian walk. What is God calling me to do; what's He calling you to do?

Let's pray.

*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 37/11/2010
© Mark Reid 2010*

5 When the time came for the evening sacrifice, I got up from where I had been grieving, and still wearing my torn clothes, I knelt in prayer and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God. 6 I said, "O God, I am too ashamed to raise my head in your presence. Our sins pile up, high above our heads; they reach as high as the heavens. 7 From the days of our ancestors until now, we, your people, have sinned greatly. Because of our sins we, our kings, and our priests have fallen into the hands of foreign kings, and we have b13 Even after everything that has happened to us in punishment for our sins and wrongs, we know that you, our God, have punished us less than we deserve and have allowed us to survive. 14 Then how can we ignore your commandments again and intermarry with these wicked people? If we do, you will be so angry that you will destroy us completely and let no one survive. been slaughtered, robbed, and carried away as prisoners. We have been totally disgraced, as we still are today. 8 Now for a short time, O Lord our God, you have been gracious to us and have let some of us escape from slavery and live in safety in this holy place. You have freed us from slavery and given us new life. 9 We were slaves, but you did not leave us in slavery. You made the emperors of Persia favour us and permit us to go on living and to rebuild your Temple, which was in ruins, and to find safety here in Judah and Jerusalem.

10 "But now, O God, what can we say after all that has happened? We have again disobeyed the commands 11 that you gave us through your servants, the prophets. They told us that the land we were going to occupy was an impure land because the people who lived in it filled it from one end to the other with disgusting, filthy actions. 12 They told us that we were never to intermarry with those people and never to help them prosper or succeed if we wanted to enjoy the land and pass it on to our descendants for ever.

13 Even after everything that has happened to us in punishment for our sins and wrongs, we know that you, our God, have punished us less than we deserve and have allowed us to survive. 14 Then how can we ignore your commandments again and intermarry with these wicked people? If we do, you will be so angry that you will destroy us completely and let no one survive. 15 Lord God of Israel, you are just, but you have let us survive. We confess our guilt to you; we have no right to come into your presence."

10:1 While Ezra was bowing in prayer in front of the Temple, weeping and confessing these sins, a large group of Israelites--men, women, and children--gathered around him, weeping bitterly.

2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the clan of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have broken faith with God by marrying foreign women, but even so there is still hope for Israel. 3 Now we must make a solemn promise to our God that we will send these women and their children away. We will do what you and the others who honor God's commands advise us to do. We will do what God's Law demands. 4 It is your responsibility to act. We are behind you, so go ahead and get it done."

5 So Ezra began by making the leaders of the priests, of the Levites, and of the rest of the people take an oath that they would do what Shecaniah had proposed. 6 Then he went from in front of the Temple into the living quarters of Jehohanan son of Eliashib, and spent the night there grieving over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. He did not eat or drink anything.

7 A message was sent throughout Jerusalem and Judah that all those who had returned from exile were to meet in Jerusalem 8 by order of the leaders of the people. If any failed to come within three days, all their property would be confiscated, and they would lose their right to be members of the community.

9 Within the three days, on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the men living in the territory of Judah and Benjamin came to Jerusalem and assembled in the Temple square. It was raining hard, and because of the weather and the importance of the meeting everyone was trembling. 10 Ezra the priest stood up and spoke to them. He said, "You have been faithless and have brought guilt on Israel by marrying foreign women. 11 Now then, confess your sins to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what pleases him. Separate yourselves from the foreigners living in our land and get rid of your foreign wives."

12 The people shouted in answer, "We will do whatever you say." 13 But they added, "The crowd is too big, and it's raining hard. We can't stand here in the open like this. This isn't something that can be done in one or two days, because so many of us are involved in this sin. 14 Let our officials stay in Jerusalem and take charge of the matter. Then let anyone who has a foreign wife come at a set time, together with the leaders and the judges of his city. In this way God's anger over this situation will be turned away." 15 No one was opposed to the plan except Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah, who had the support of Meshullam and of Shabbethai, a Levite.

16 The returned exiles accepted the plan, so Ezra the priest appointed men from among the heads of the clans and recorded their names. On the first day of the tenth month they began their investigation, 17 and within the next three months they investigated all the cases of men with foreign wives.